**English national character vs. Russian national character: stereotypes**



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**Introduction**

The 21st century is already marked by great increase in communication between many different nations that make up modern community. Stereotypes are an essential part of this cross - cultural communication, providing individuals with stable, sometimes mythical, ideas about their native country and about the character of other nations.

Have you ever asked yourself what does the world think about you just because you were born in a certain nation? Of course there is a variety of common national stereotypes about inhabitants of various nations, held by inhabitants of other nations. Such stereotypes are usually prejudicial and often ill-informed and overlap with ethnic or racial stereotypes. However, some stereotypes may be positive.

So, first of all let’s answer the question: what is a stereotype?

**Definition:** A stereotype is "...a fixed, over-generalized belief about a particular group or class of people.” (Cardwell, 1996). In other words stereotyping is believing that people of a certain group, race or religion all have the same characteristics when they don't.

Learning from the media and talking to older people, we pick up a lot of stereotypes about other nations. In every country there are plenty of stereotypes about residents, some maybe true but most of them are untrue and very wrongful.

As for the term “national character”, it is used to describe the enduring personality characteristics and unique life styles found among the populations of particular national states. This behavior is sometimes considered on an abstract level, that is, as cultural behavior without actual reference to necessarily different personality modalities. It may also be considered as motivated by underlying psychological mechanisms characteristic of given people.

This paper looks at stereotypes of the English and Russian people, at how other people around the world see these two different nations.

**1. English National Stereotypes**

The English are said to be reserved in manners, dress and speech. They are famous for their politeness, self-discipline and especially for their sense of humor. English people have a strong sense of humor which sometimes can be hard for foreigners to understand. "No hugs, dear. We only show affection to dogs and horses." - Jocelyn Dashwood.



Such characteristics are, of course, not reliable description of individual people from these countries – they are just stereotypes. So, let’s have a closer look at some of them.

**1.1 English are reserved**

It is probably true that the English are more reserved than the people of many other countries. The English are reserved as already mentioned and they don ́t like speaking about themselves and their private life. They find it comparatively difficult to indicate friendship by open displays of affection. For example, it is not the convention to kiss when meeting a friend. Instead, friendship is symbolized by behaving as casually as possible. The most favorite topic for conversation is the weather, definitely. As this is impersonal topic. The English are always talking about the weather. Unlike many others, this stereotype is actually true to life. But constant remarks about the weather at chance meetings are not the result of polite conventions. They are not obligatory. Rather, they are the result of the fact that, on the one hand, to ask personal questions would be rude while, at the same time, silence would also be rude. The weather is a very convenient topic with which to ’fill the gap’.

**1.2 English are obsessed with the class system**

Although traditional class boundaries have become more blurred over the years, most English people do tend to identify with one of the 3 main classes for better or for worse and although some claim that social mobility is greater now than it was for previous generations, evidence suggests that Britain unfortunately remains divided along class lines.



**1.3 English love to queue**

If two people arrive at the jump-off point at the same time, you can always spot the Englishman - he’ll be the one who says “after you.”

Although no-one in their right mind loves to queue anywhere, many English people will state that they would prefer forming an orderly queue than the type of ‘free for all’ policy they may have seen adopted in other countries (although this in itself might be yet another stereotype!) However, the record for longest toilet queue is actually held by the Belgians and occurred when 756 people waited in line to use a latrine as part of UNICEF World Water Day activities!



The English have a passion for queuing (lining up) and appear to outsiders to have endless patience. The English queue everywhere for everything, including football tickets, sales (when people queue for days or weeks), buses, trains, aircraft, fast food (or slow food if there’s a long queue), post offices, government offices, hospital beds, concerts, cafeterias, doctors’ and dentists’ waiting rooms, groceries, supermarkets, theatre tickets, banks and payphones.

**1.4** **English drink tea all day**

So this one might be true… many English people do love a cup of tea (or 20) a day. They also prefer to take tea breaks instead of coffee breaks. Afternoon tea is traditionally very important.

Each Englishman consumes 1.89 KG of tea per year according to 2009 figures and the country is ranked 6th in a list which is topped by the United Arab Emirates, followed by Ireland and Mauritania. Of course, tea is the 2nd most popular drink in the world next to water, so English are not alone in their collective love for a cup of tea.



**1.5** **English love to celebrate Royal occasions**

This is definitely true as Royal Weddings and Jubilees are lavish occasions which millions of English people love to celebrate by waving Union Jacks, organising street parties and donning fantastic Great British fancy dress costumes! Indeed, as 24.5 million viewers watched the Royal Wedding of Prince William and Princess Catherine on TV, if a Royal Wedding was held every week it would certainly eclipse viewing figures of ‘EastEnders’ , ‘Coronation Street’ and ‘The X Factor’!

**1.6 Everyone in England talks like the Queen**

**The stereotype that everyone in England has a plummy accent and talks like the Queen is** a common misconception among many foreigners. There are numerous accents and dialects, half of which are so thick that you could be forgiven for thinking that people are conversing in an ancient secret language. A Briton’s accent and choice of words is usually a dead giveaway as to his upbringing.

Standard English is itself a synthetic language amalgamated from elements of regional languages.

### 1.7 Drinking habbits

Contrary to popular belief, the English aren’t all drunks and are languishing in a fairly lowly 12th position in the alcohol consumption league among the world’s top 30 developed countries.



So, these were some of the most common stereotypes about the English: some of them are true, some – just partly, others are only misconceptions. Now, let’s turn our attention to the stereotypes about Russians.

**2. Russian National Stereotypes**

When we talk about Russian stereotypes, we often hear: Winter, Vodka and Bears. Let’s give a more detailed description of the most widespread stereotypes concerning Russian people and see whether they are true or not.

**2.1 Russian hospitality**

There is a big difference between the Russian tradition of hospitality and a friendly attitude towards guests in other countries of the world. The legends about the breadth of the Russian soul have a very good reason to exist. Russians love to accept guests and make great hosts. When in Russia, you don't need to wait for a special occasion like a birthday or a holiday to visit a friend or a neighbor. Russians like visiting each other, meeting in friendly companies for dinner, or just stopping by to catch up on what's going on. The latter is called "to drop in for a cup of coffee" (забежать на чашечку кофе).

Russians like to serve a festive dinner for the guests on occasion of such holidays as birthdays, New Year and Easter. The necessary attributes of a holiday dinner include meat and cold appetizers (jellied minced meat known as "kholodets" is very common), one or more hot dishes, and cake for dessert. Russian housewives prefer to cook everything themselves and it is expected that a real Russian woman should be a good cook.

As for a traditional attribute of Russian celebrations one should mention a karavai. It is traditional Russian bread. For centuries, bread in Russia has been a symbol of fertility and prosperity, with a special role reserved for a round loaf, called a karavai due to its symbolic resemblance to the sun. The karavai was used in many traditional rituals, including weddings, funerals, and housewarming celebrations.



**2.2 Russians love vodka**

Almost all Russians are capable of drinking vodka like water, and most of them will always have a bottle in their house whether they drink it regularly or not. If you are ever at an event of any sort organized by Russian people, there will be vodka there, and it will be offered to you! It’s not true, however, that Russians get extremely offended when you refuse a shot – it’s more that they’re surprised, because to them it’s not at all a big deal. And of course, remember that just because Russians like vodka, it does not mean that they are alcoholics – they can just drink more than most other people.



**2.3 Russian women are extremely beautiful**

Today the Western stereotypical image of Russian women is that they are beautiful.

Walk down any street in any Russian city and you will see that this is absolutely true. Young Russian women are gorgeous, and they are very particular about their appearance – most Russian women will not go outside without their hair and make-up perfectly done and their outfit, shoes and accessories perfectly matching. Even in the winter, you will see many Russian women on the streets in the following outfit: short skirt, tights, heels, and a fur coat.



It is interesting to notice how the image of Russian women changed during the past 30 years.

During the Cold War the Western stereotype image of Russian women was that they were fat, masculine and ugly.  It came with a measure of condescension.  Russian women typically were represented as peasants, street cleaners or tractor drivers.

Today the Western stereotypical image of Russian women is that they are beautiful.  However this is not something to be celebrated.  On the contrary it is something to be feared or at least to be on one’s guard against.

Where Russian women during the Cold War were thought of as plain and dull but ultimately honest, today they are represented as materialistic, money-focused, tacky, manipulative, promiscuous, under-dressed and amoral.  They are femmes fatales out to gull unsuspecting innocent Westerners of their secrets, their morals, and (of course) their money.  Typically they are spies, prostitutes or gangsters’ molls.

**2.4 Russians are chain-smokers**

Although the Russian government is slowly starting to impose harsh anti-smoking regulations in an attempt to end the smoking epidemic gripping the country, Russia still has one of the highest smoking rates in the world. Expect second-hand smoke to be practically inescapable on Russian streets.

**2.5 Russians are superstitious**

Russian people have a lot of “superstitions” that are mostly habits – like “knock on wood” is in many cultures. Many Russians will sit down inside their house before leaving for a trip to ensure a good journey; they will consider it good luck to break a glass accidentally, and they will spit three times over their shoulder after they knock on wood. Most people don’t actually believe these things “work”, but they always – always – do them anyway.

**2.6 Russians are blunt and serious**

Russians always have a serious face on when they’re in public. It is considered impolite to express strong (especially loud) emotions around strangers. (Of course, this all changes in private, but that’s a different story.) Russian people are also very blunt and will not beat around the bush; they don’t tolerate small talk or niceties and much prefer to get to the point of a conversation. Except for young (Americanized) people, you will never hear Russian people exchanging “how are you?”s as they walk past each other on the street – this question is reserved for private conversations and demands an honest answer.

**2.7 Gender roles are alive and well in Russia**

Men are men and women are women in Russia… in every aspect of daily life. Men are expected to be very traditionally chivalrous, opening doors, pulling out chairs, and paying for the ladies. Women are expected to cook, clean and always look gorgeous – and not act offended when they encounter these kinds of attitudes.

**Conclusion**

To draw the conclusion, one can say that English and Russian national characters are worlds apart. Each nation has its own historical past, way of living, culture and traditions. National character is determined by historical and physical causes, such as climate, heredity and even food.

There are many [stereotypes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stereotype) surrounding these two [nations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nation). The stereotypes may have kernels of truth to them, but they are not wholly correct, and so are heavily misleading. In some cases, negative stereotypes have been spread by one country in order to discredit another. Sometimes countries may promote national stereotypes about themselves.

So it’s up to everybody to decide whether a certain stereotype is true or not.

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